

Eliciting Student-Talk

By Michael E. Rudder

Traditionally, the teacher was viewed as an organizer of classroom activities; a controller over the implementation of these activities; and an evaluator of students' performances of the activities. This dominant role was based on the premise that the teacher was the "expert" who would impart his or her knowledge or "expertise" to the unknowing student, who in turn would be assessed by evaluation instruments intended to measure the amount of transferred "expertise."

Nowadays, students play a much more active role in the learning process. No longer passive recipients, they are contributing to the planning and implementation of what transpires in the classroom; continually adopting and adapting strategies to accomplish immediate as well as long-term goals; and acquiring and developing critical thinking and cooperative learning skills. This emphasis in language teaching and learning is on the communicative nature of language. It is the content of the message that takes preeminence over accuracy of form. In short, the essence is language for communication and self-expression.

The communicative approach emphasizes ways to increase student-talk and decrease teacher-talk. This approach to language teaching has necessitated including in our lesson plans the production or performance stage, in which students have the opportunity to use the new language in simulated real-life situations. We create activities that engage students in meaningful interaction, in which their attention is focused more on what they are saying than on how they are saying it. It is this free practice that enables learners to use the language outside the "artificial" context of the classroom.

Message vs. Errors

The communicative approach has forced us to reexamine not only how we elicit student-talk, but also how we respond to it. Now that we are interested in the content of the message, at least as much as the form, we need to respond genuinely to student-talk with the same natural emotions that we inject into everyday conversation. Only by doing this can we really convince students that we are interested in what they are saying.

The communicative approach has consequently altered the way we deal with and react to errors. According to David Cross (1992), in real life we rarely react to "local" errors—those which do not interfere with comprehension of the message; but we do react to "global" errors—those which impede comprehension of the message, simply because of communication gaps. If we are engaged in activities aimed at developing fluency, we may choose not to respond to specific errors at all, at least immediately.

If, on the other hand, we are engaged in activities aimed at improving accuracy, we may consider it important to respond to incorrect forms. A simple nod, facial expression, gesture, or repeat of a mistake with rising intonation is often sufficient indication of an incorrect form, which the student is capable of correcting him/herself. Furthermore, if exercised properly and politely,

students are generally not intimidated by input or help from their peers. Both self-correction and peer-correction encourage the active role of the student and promote cooperative learning in the classroom.

Free and Controlled Activities

With the renewed emphasis on student involvement, the teacher is obliged to create and implement both controlled and free activities that encourage students to speak. The venue for speaking can and should be integrated with the teaching of listening, reading, and writing skills.

When the focus is on listening or reading skills, the students are drawn into the schema-building, vocabulary discussion, or other preparatory activities of the prelistening or prereading stage. Furthermore, student-talk is elicited through guide questions, comprehension questions, and directives to retell, describe, and summarize the events, characters, or places in the listening or reading text. In the postlistening or postreading stage, the text is exploited in more interesting and challenging activities such as debates, discussions, and role plays which center around student-talk.

Student-talk is further maximized by having activities that involve pair work and group work, as these will engage all the students in speaking. Also, both individual and group writing exercises involve some speaking centered on schema-building and brainstorming. Further interaction occurs in group writing and peer editing, since students exchange ideas and make corrections or improvements in a collective composition. In short, speaking is the skill that seems to be most easily integrated into the teaching of each of the other basic skills.

Lesson Stages

Speaking can also be a part of every stage of the lesson including—presentation, practice, and performance. Although the presentation stage is dominated by the teacher, students can also contribute personal ideas and talk about what they already know about the new language or topic. Also, at this stage, learners should be encouraged to use their imagination and make guesses or predictions about stories or dialogues.

Adrian Doff (1988) discusses the value of this type of elicitation by making the following points. First, it helps to focus the students' attention and make them think. Second, it helps students make the connection between what they already know and what they are about to learn. Third, it helps the teacher assess what the students already know, thereby making it easier to adapt the presentation to an appropriate level. I would add that the inclusion of eliciting in the presentation stage adds variety to an otherwise teacher-dominated activity and enhances student motivation.

In the practice stage of the lesson, students have the opportunity to reproduce and practice the new words or structures. The use of pictures in this stage greatly reduces the monotony of mechanical drills. By using pictures, the teacher is able to elicit predictable responses in a more interesting way and with less teacher-talk.

Jeremy Harmer (1983) refers to the stages of practice as personalization and localization. The former allows students to convey meaningful information while talking about themselves; the latter allows them to use the places they live as a reference point. So, instead of talking about the

characters in the textbook, they can talk about themselves, their friends, and their own families. Likewise, the places in the textbook can be replaced by the names of local places. By personalizing and localizing the information or situations in the textbook, students can adapt and expand written texts or dialogues in useful, meaningful, interesting, and beneficial speaking practice.

The performance or production stage of the lesson should provide the students with the opportunity to use the language previously presented and practiced during the lesson in a communicative context. Students should be encouraged to express their ideas, opinions, and feelings in discussions and debates. The important element of fun can be injected into this stage with games and simulated role play. Genuine questions that encourage student-talk are used in information gap tasks.

Conclusion

Developing students' communicative oral skills is one of our most important goals in language teaching. Now more than ever before, oral skills are essential for interactive survival in a global setting. To accomplish this goal of developing students' communicative oral skills, we need to encourage interactive discourse and self-expression. Classroom activities that increase student-talk and promote interaction among students for communicative purposes will help us reach this goal. Such activities can be implemented at all stages of the lesson and in conjunction with the teaching of the other basic skills. Communicative language teaching offers us an unlimited realm of options and ideas for encouraging and enhancing student-talk.

References

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